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ABSTRACT

A study investigated children's attitudes, information sources, and interest toward the 1992 presidential election. Focus groups were conducted one week before the 1992 presidential election with 13 fourth- and fifth-grade elementary school children. Results indicated several themes: (1) overall, the children's knowledge of abstract concepts like democracy was not articulated as clearly as concrete information and feelings toward the electoral process; (2) President Bush was not the object of children's idealization--the children's images of Bush and their ratings of his job performance were overwhelmingly negative; (3) their support for challengers was not bolstered with factual content; (4) the campaign period resulted in a high level of excitement; (5) their faith in the system is solid; (6) many of the children judged Bush based on their internalized conceptions about the official role of president; (7) the children displayed varying levels of political information; (8) the broadcast media was the major source of political information; and (9) several of the children had a sophisticated political understanding. (Thirty-one references, participant demographic information, and the focus group interview schedule are attached.) (RS)

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Tellin' It Like It Is:
Children's Attitudes toward the Electoral Process and the '92 Campaign

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Introduction

What were George Bush and Bill Clinton like when they were young? Where do they stand on the issues? What's a day with a candidate like? Can you find Waldo on the campaign trail?

These questions were asked and answered by Newsweek magazine (September 28, 1992) as part of complete 1992 presidential election coverage for a new Newsweek readership: kids. The pull-out section, titled "The Big Vote," included pictures of the candidates and their wives, a political crossword puzzle called "The People's Choice" and an issue-at-a-glance chart comparing Bush and Clinton on the environment, the economy, education, national security, health care, and social policy.

Newsweek was not alone in its effort to educate and involve children in the presidential election. MTV produced an exciting series of politically-driven programs, including an open forum where Bill Clinton answered young people's questions and the slick "Rock the Vote" program featuring pop stars like Madonna and movie stars like Christian Slater emphasizing the importance of political participation. Television sitcoms from "Beverly Hills, 90210" to "Blossom" took on the election and showed kids how to translate beliefs into action. Whether writing political editorials for West Beverly High's newspaper, "The Blaze," or cheering Blossom on as she challenges a two-term incumbent for the office of class president, kids have been at the forefront of election politics in 1992.

Early political socialization research has examined the role of parents, peers, and school in helping children to acquire basic political orientations. In recent years, an increasing amount of attention has been paid to the role of the media. However, a limited body of research exists that addresses children's attitudes toward the electoral process during campaign periods. In addition to standard media election coverage, Campaign '92 popped up on general entertainment and kids-oriented programming. Given the diverse media environment of Campaign '92, we investigated children's attitudes, information sources, and interest toward the presidential election.

Methods

We conducted focus groups one week before the 1992 presidential election with 13 fourth- and fifth-grade elementary school children. These children attend an after-school program in Oregon, Wis., a small suburb south of Madison. The after-school program coordinator separated the children into two groups. Our first group was comprised of seven girls and our second group had six boys.

The average focus group participant was white, age 9 to 11, and the child of two working parents (see Appendix A).

One researcher was introduced as the moderator, a University of Wisconsin-Madison student who was writing a paper that involved talking with children about the presidential election. The other two researchers were identified as assistants who would be observing the discussion.

The children sat in a semi-circle on the floor of the after-school program's general purpose room with the moderator in the middle. Two tape recorders were used to record the discussion. We spoke with each group for approximately 45 minutes.

Results

Democracy and Voting

The child's political world is a conglomerate of information including some familiarity with the roles of government, the norms, values and rules of the system, and specific political actors. Various studies have attempted to quantify this political knowledge, (see Conway et al, 1975; Chaffee and Tims, 1982) but few have dealt with affect -- children's feelings toward the political process. Communication researchers maintain that the first election campaign an individual follows is critical to his or her political development (Chaffee and Yang, 1990). Television makes the campaign experience available to children, and though they do not have voting privileges, many become politically energized through discussions of politics at school and with friends or family. We attempted to elicit the children's emotional responses to the political world by asking about the personal significance of democracy, voting, and the 1992 presidential election.

Most of the children recognized the term "democracy," but few understood its meaning. The girls were asked if they knew what type of government the United States has, and general responses were as follows:

"Economy?"

"Congress?"

"Democrat?"

"Democracy!"

Once the term "democracy" had been uttered, it received general approval from the girls. When asked what it meant, they were unsure. The boys had a clearer understanding of "democracy." When asked why they thought it was important, responses included:

Dusty: Democracy means that you don't have one guy running it. Everyone has something to do with it.

Matt: In some countries, they have a king and queen and then the first-born boy is the next king. The first-born boy might not be that good of a king.

Dusty: Yeah, what if he's retarded or lame?

The question of voting generated longer, more philosophical responses from the participants. Many of the children's responses suggested a grasp of the importance of citizen participation in classical democratic theory. Atkin (1981) writes that youth must be inculcated with a desire to fulfill social role expectations regarding political behavior. The significance the children attach to voting indicates that they have adopted at least one aspect of democracy.

Q: What does it mean to vote?

Andrea: You go to the places and pick the person you like, that you've heard their speech and you think can do the best job.

Emily: When you're voting, it's important to vote, because it makes a change in the country. Everyone's vote counts. And when you're voting you don't vote for who's younger, or who's older. No, I want to change my idea. You see, I think you should vote because of if you don't think the president did a very good job or if you think someone else could do better. You vote on how good you think they'll do, like if they'll make real good decisions or if they'll make real rotten decisions and great promises and everything. I think that adults do think about it, like, I know my parents do 'cause they watch the debates and everything and they think Clinton did a good job and gave a good speech.

Vicky: You'd have to pay attention a lot to make sure of who you really want and you should vote. Otherwise you're letting people choose things for you.

Andrea: I think it would be important to vote so you could help get the right president or what you think is the best.

Katie: I would vote, because even one vote can help, because in school we learned today about how every vote counts.

Lindsay: I'll probably vote, and I won't be able to vote until I'm 21, because when I'm 18 they would have already voted last year.

Emily: I think the year I'm able to vote which will be when I'm 16 or 18, I don't know, I think that it'll be kind of challenging. Like this year, I don't think we had a very good selection. But it depends on how many people there are -- if there are three, and I think one will do a good job, then I'll vote. I'll probably always vote, but sometimes you don't think that any of them are any good or would fit.

Courtney: If you don't vote, it may end up being someone who you didn't want and if you would've voted, it would have made the difference.

Alissa: My dad doesn't vote. But I want to, because every vote does count, and if you really want this one person, and you decide, well, he'll get enough votes so you don't have to go vote for him, and then he ends up being one short, you could have made it so he could have won.

Katie: It's a bad choice not to vote. If they decide that day, because they've heard a candidate is good, it might be too late.

Andrea: Every vote helps.

The common thread in these comments is the idea that one vote can make a difference. The participants held to this idea quite passionately. Of particular interest is the response from Alissa. Her intention to vote, even though her father does not, suggests a commitment to political activity; she feels strongly about a political behavior that her father has rejected. Greenstein (1960) compared adults' and children's feelings of political efficacy, and he pointed out that children are much more positive in their political orientations: among the children in his study, less than two percent said they would not vote as eligible adults.

After discussing the concept of voting, we turned our attention to the specific act of voting in the 1992 election. The children proved eager to share their vote

choice. The overwhelming majority selected Bill Clinton. Ross Perot received some consideration. None of the participants chose George Bush, though one fifth grader remembered selecting him in a school mock election four years ago. Some children offered a rationale for their vote choice. Others responded only with a candidate's name; they could not specify a reason for voting along the same lines as their classmates, but were firm in their vote choice. Participants were asked to name the candidate they would be most likely to vote for in the 1992 election and to offer any reason for that choice:

Dusty: I'd pick Clinton because he's a Democrat. If you get a Democrat, he's more for everyone else in the country and everyone else around. The Republican is more closer to having himself running everything.

Matt: Beats me. I don't know yet.

Dusty: (in response to *Matt*) Say I'm not sure between Ross Perot and Bill Clinton but I know I don't want Bush, then a lot of people wouldn't vote because they're not sure who to vote for, but they should vote for either Perot or Clinton if they don't want Bush, because that's one more vote against Bush.

It seems that Dusty's political awareness has evolved to the point where he can articulate the concept of "strategic voting." In this context, he is advising his undecided peer that casting a vote for any candidate other than Bush equals a strike against Bush.

Matt: (in response to *Dusty*) My mom told me that if you can't decide between two things, then you should think about the good points of one versus the good points of the other. That could be a good way to make up your mind.

Dusty: (in response to *Matt*) If you don't like any of the three, you don't have to vote for them. You don't have to vote for the three presidential candidates. You could vote for yourself. My dad won't vote for Bush and not for Perot. He doesn't like Clinton all that much, but I'm pretty sure he'll vote for Clinton.

Dusty demonstrates a degree of sophistication regarding vote choice. Although

he does not specify a write-in vote, he suggests this when he offers the option of voting for oneself.

The girls responded as follows to the question of vote choice:

Vicky: Clinton. Not Perot -- he seems like a quitter. He dropped out of the campaign, so maybe he would drop out of the presidency. I think it is important to vote and not just judge a person on their looks. In this one school, they showed pictures of Bush and Clinton, and all the younger kids picked Bush and all the older kids picked Clinton.

Katie: My brother voted for Clinton in school because he's youngest. I disagreed with him, because he shouldn't have voted for him just because he's younger.

Emily: Clinton. I even remember the last election. We had to vote for school, we had little booths and tallies in first grade, I think. We voted for Bush because we thought he would do better than this other guy.

Alissa: Clinton or Perot.

Andrea: Clinton. Not Perot because he dropped out. Bush just doesn't seem right for president.

Lindsay: Clinton. Perot I'm not really sure about, but he seems like he wouldn't be good. Bush wasn't a very good president.

Katie: Clinton. He sounds like a good president and like he makes good choices.

Courtney: Clinton.

Andrea: There's some people in class that don't want anybody.

One possible explanation for the children's rejection of George Bush can be traced to research on the development of cynicism in adolescence. Studies indicate that the socialization process typically begins with vague emotional connections and personalized identification with established authority figures, such as the president

(Atkin, 1981). As youth move into adolescence, a more rational and factual conception of political roles, processes and institutions develops and supersedes the previous unquestioned affect for established political actors. Some distrust and cynicism emerges in evaluation of these actors.

Images of the President

Children's political socialization research since the early 1960s demonstrates that the U.S. president plays a major role in the development of images of government and the overall system of political authority (Greenstein, 1960; Easton and Dennis, 1969). A major finding from this early research was that children devoted significant attention to the President and his official role. Even very young children recognized the title and readily referred to the president. In fact, Greenstein found that 9- to 13-year-old children mentioned the President more than any other authority role, including teachers, physicians and police officers, as being the "most important."

In our discussions, all the children easily identified the president as the leader of the country.

Q: How is our country run? Who's the leader?
[Almost everyone responded out loud. The general responses were:
"President Bush"
"George Bush."
"Bush."]

Most of the children remembered that Ronald Reagan was president before Bush. In addition, a few of the girls tried to name the candidate who lost to Bush in the 1988 election, at which time they were five or six years old. Although they could not remember it, they knew Michael Dukakis' name was difficult to pronounce, and a few suggested that his name began with a "k."

The early studies found almost no hostile or cynical feelings toward the president. Greenstein's investigation, for example, suggested that, in general, children did not share the skepticism and distrust of politics and politicians of their elders. Adults in Greenstein's research were about five times more likely than children to criticize the president, whereas children idealized the president and considered him a benevolent, likable leader. Children conceptualized the president as helpful, almost guardian-like.

Easton and Hess (1962) reported consistent, longitudinal findings that children believed the president, among other virtues, possessed wisdom, power, honesty,

goodness, and watchfulness. Moreover, they point out that children's positive political evaluations extend to the general political community. In their study, children were neither critical nor dissatisfied with the political community, and the researchers asserted that this attachment to the system was facilitated by children's images of the president -- a "well defined point in the political structure that is highly visible and important for children" (241). (see, Hess and Easton, 1960)

Easton and Hess suggest that children's psychological need to feel secure and safe precipitates and contributes to an on-going idealized image of the president as the benevolent leader: "As they grow older, fewer children hold the same high opinion of the president, but the absolute level remains high" (243). In addition, their studies imply that children's psychological needs are reinforced by parents, who tend to protect children by describing politics in "rosy" terms.

More recent research (Dennis and Webster, 1975), however, suggests that children's images of the president may not be stable across time. Their findings demonstrate that children's images of the president may develop within a dynamic political structure, in addition to the effects of children's individual socioeconomic, cultural and psychological contexts. Dennis and Webster maintain that changes over time, including who holds the office of president, important national events, and current public issues and concerns, may affect children's opinions about the president and the political system.

In comparing children's images of the president in 1962 and 1974, Dennis and Webster found several distinctions, most notably, the drop in idealization of the president by children at all grade levels (second through sixth grades) in 1974. Other ratings of the president included benignancy (the president "would always/almost always want to help me if I needed it"), knowledge (the president "knows more than anyone/most people"), and reliability (the president "always/almost always keeps his promises"). The results of the study show a significant drop in positive affect for the president in each of these image dimensions between the two time points.

Dennis and Webster also found that in 1974, the president's role was diminished from the "omnifunctional" role found in earlier research: "In the era of Watergate, both Congress and the Court gain in children's perceptions of who has the largest role in running the country" (396). The research also illumines the effect of age on presidential image across historical periods: even in 1974, younger children tended to idealize the president and considered him to play a larger-than-life role in the political arena than older children. As the researchers note, however, "...just as the president in early 1974 had come to occupy a smaller place in the hearts of his young

countrypersons, he held a smaller place in their minds as well" (398).

Other studies during the early- to mid-1970s point to a decline in childhood idealization of the president and political authority (Arterton, 1974; Greenstein, 1975; Hawkins et al., 1975; Sears, 1975). As some of this other research was conducted prior to Watergate, Dennis and Webster suggest:

> The more negative childhood vision of the president and of government is thus the cumulative result of a longer period of stress on the system of political authority by events such as the Vietnam War, the mid-sixties urban riots, and by the incumbency of presidents who were perceived as less than heroic by the general public (403).

In our discussions with the children, the absence of idealization of the president was striking. Very few children spoke well of President Bush; in fact, several children found considerable fault with him. Bush was the target of substantive critiques, not just name-calling. The major themes arising from our discussions were Bush's failure to protect the environment, his unfulfilled promises, and his poor "fit" with the role of president.

Along with cynicism, perhaps idealization is missing from the children's characterizations of the president since the election process sparks a comparative context among campaigners. All the children knew the other presidential candidates, but, beyond name recognition, the information levels were low. Conversely, the children had plenty of information on which to rate Bush, and the president did not fare well in their evaluations of his performance. Emily acknowledged that the candidates may have better chances of winning the election than the incumbent, because they cannot be judged on their record as president.

The early research indicated that children's positive assessments of the president seemed to be rooted in feelings, not in factual information (Greenstein; Easton and Hess). Easton and Hess suggested that children's non-rational cognitive processes "enable children to develop favorable feelings for the presidential form of authority in the United States long before they know very much of a concrete nature about it" (240). Our investigation, however, demonstrates that the children have compiled a significant amount of factual ammunition to substantiate their evaluations of the president. Their critiques of Bush are based almost solely on sociotropic criteria, such as the environment, taxes, foreign aid, and promises to the American public.

Q: What do you think about the president? What does the president do when he runs the country?

Emily: I don't really think George Bush did a very good job, because he wasn't very environmental, and when they had the big Earth Summit in Brazil, they said their biggest problem was the Earth, and they were gonna sign a contract about the smoke and the ozone and everything, and he didn't want to sign it, because he wasn't really into it. He thought that the economy was our biggest problem.

Q: So, you think it was bad that we didn't sign...?

Emily: Well, I mean I don't think he was fit for president.

Q: What do you think, Vicky?

Vicky: I agree with Emily that George Bush just doesn't seem to be a very good president.

Q: Any particular reason? Or, any other reasons you think he might not be a good president?

Vicky: He says things that he sometimes doesn't keep.

Q: Like promises? Is that bad if you don't keep promises? Do you remember any thing he's promised?

Vicky: Well, he said, "Read my lips. No new taxes." And, then we got...

Q: More taxes?

Vicky: Uh-huh.

Emily: Well, in the election for this year, he said that "Read my lips. No new taxes." And, we want new taxes, lower, because he raised the taxes and the

election...1989, I think he said that he wouldn't raise taxes...he just made lots of promises that he didn't keep, and I think Clinton or Clinton and Gore or Ross Perot have a better chance at it, because they don't have anything to judge against. I mean, they don't know, but, Bush had four years, so they know what to judge him by.

Q: Do other people agree with Emily or Vicky, or disagree...What do you think?

Katie: I agree with them, because he just has been making the wrong choices.

Q: Wrong choices? In terms of...Like, what kind of choices did he make? Anything specific when you say 'wrong choices'?

Katie: Well, not really...specific, but, he's made lots of them.

Lindsay: Well, I don't think he was a good president, and all he really cared about was making himself rich, and he didn't care about other people.

Emily: I think...what Ross Perot said...is that he said we should keep the jobs here in the USA to prove that we have the money to do it. But, um, and Bush is saying keep the jobs going in other countries, 'cause someday we're gonna need the help. But, like my dad, he'll only buy things that are made in the USA, 'cause that proves that we have enough money and jobs and people have jobs to make the stuff.

At this point, Emily volunteered that she believed the president had done some good work in foreign affairs. She also mentioned that other people use the president's record to evaluate him during the campaign. She seemed to link Bush's policy actions with his standing in the polls.

Emily: Even though I think he kind of, he made one great choice with the Gulf War, he did the right thing, and we won...and, he's getting...now, I think he's getting more votes because he got all our prisoners, all our American prisoners back from Vietnam...and, because the Vietnamese people said that they'd give us them back. People don't know how Bush

got them back, but, he got them back...and, that's what people were judging him on.

While our discussion with the boys differed significantly in terms of dynamics, the general impression of President Bush mirrored many of the critiques voiced by the girls. Overall, the boys shared an unfavorable view of the president. Some of the boys referred to him in ways completely devoid of the respect formerly accorded the president by children in past research.

Q: What do you think of Bush?

Dusty: Read my lips. New taxes.

Ben: I hate Bush! He sucks!

Q: Tell me why. Why do you hate Bush?

Ben: Because he didn't do anything as president, and he lies major time.

Q: How does he lie?

Ben: Like, he said he was gonna save the animals, and then he really destroys their home.

Dusty: Bush sucks. Case closed. I do have a reason why though. Well, okay, he said he wasn't gonna raise taxes. He did. And, he's got the world's worst vice president, besides Perot. 'Course, all of 'em are pretty bad. Gore's not the greatest. And, then, what was I saying? Oh, yeah. Then, even though he said no more new taxes, then he gets all the taxes, and then what does he do with all that money he's got from all the taxes? Throws it over to other foreign countries. "Here, here, take my money! Please!" Geez, he could at least spend it in schools or something!

Jacob: Who got us through the war? That one war. The Desert Storm. George Bush. Who made it? George Bush.

Q: Is that good or bad about the war?

Jacob: Bad, because George Bush got us into it. And, it never would have happened.

Trenton: Bush's vice president is bad, because he insulted "Murphy Brown."

Some underlying good feelings toward Bush did exist. Trenton defended the president, noting that he is not all bad. Matt also volunteered that not every problem should be blamed on the president.

In order to further investigate children's perceptions of the president and his office, we asked if the children aspired to be president. None of the girls have this goal. Only two boys agreed to consider the job in the future. The children all cited the demands and substantial responsibilities of the job.

Q: Would you like to be president? Would it be a good job?

Alissa: I don't want to be president.

Q: How come?

Alissa: I sorta don't wanna be in charge of the whole country.

Q: It's a lot of responsibility, right?

Alissa: I don't know...

Q: Doesn't it look like it would be fun?

Andrea: I think it'd be a real big responsibility, and I think it might be kind of hard.

Q: A kind of hard job to do...?

Courtney: I would think it would be fun, but it'd be very busy and stuff and you'd hardly have any time to do stuff with your family or anything.

Emily: See, I wouldn't want to be president, because you wouldn't make as much money as if you were, like, president of Chrysler or something like that, because the Chrysler president makes like over a million or like 300 million a year, and the president only gets half that.

Vicky: I wouldn't want to be president. For one thing, it's a hard job, and you go through a lot of stress, even going through the election, you have to go through all those debates and everything.

Among the boys, Brian did not want to be president, but he was not sure why not. Trenton also did not want to be president, because he perceives the job as a compilation of many tough decisions, on subjects he has not yet learned about.

Trenton: The president has to read about four million papers, and, just when he gets done with one, someone hands him another paper to read and figure out.

Noting the high information quality of their critiques, we discussed ways the children learn about the president and his general performance. Most of the children said they listened to and talked with their parents or siblings about the president and the campaign. For the girls, the most salient sources seemed to be parents and television. When asked where they find their information about the president, most of the children said they watched part of the debates and the news.

Media Use and Effects

Early research in political socialization focused on the family's primary role and treated the mass media as a peripheral variable, if at all. Not until the 1970s did researchers even focus on the media as agents of political socialization, and most of those studies "treated political [media] exposure as a criterion of socialization, rather than an independent influence on the child" (Atkin, 1981: 301). This lack of interest in the media as an influence can be traced to the continuing influence of the "limited effects" model (Chaffee, Ward, and Tipton, 1970). More recent research has focused on the media usage of children as a dependent variable. In fact, recent studies of children's mass media use show a large amount of exposure to political

news, and evidence suggests children learn from the media.

Gollin and Anderson (1980) surveyed over 1,000 students ages 6 to 17. They found that 61 percent of older elementary school children (ages 9 to 11) answered "yes" to having ever read a newspaper, and 24 percent reported daily newspaper use (compared to 52 percent of high school students). The biggest jump in newspaper reading was shown to occur around ages 10 to 12. Although children may read the newspaper, Gollin and Anderson found that they do not read it primarily for the news. The most well-read section of the newspaper was comics, followed by front-page news, sports, entertainment listings, soft news, and, finally, hard news.

The researchers also found that 23 percent of older elementary school children reported watching television news everyday, and 26 percent reported listening to news on the radio "yesterday." When asked if they had read Time or another newsmagazine during the past month, 16 percent of these older children reported that they had.

Drew and Reeves (1980) looked at news exposure among children in the third to seventh grades (ages 8 to 13). Thirty-two percent of their sample watched national television news, and 46 percent watched local television news "almost every day" and "sometimes." The main reason for watching the news was sports (47 percent), weather (33 percent), and news (19 percent). The frequency of exposure varied only slightly by grade level. The children's greatest news interests were local news (68 percent) and state news (55 percent). Interest in foreign news was less (20 percent).

Election studies, focusing mainly on adolescents, have found more interest and greater news viewing during the campaign period (McLeod, O'Keefe, and Wackman, 1969). In a study of media use during the 1976 presidential primaries, Atkin (1977) found that 25 percent of older elementary school children had seen television news stories about the presidential candidates "very often" and 33 percent "pretty often."

Other studies have found moderate correlations between media use and children's political knowledge (Atkin and Gantz, 1978; Conway, et al., 1975). In his study of the 1976 presidential primary campaign, Atkin (1977) found knowledge about the major presidential candidates moderately correlated with news viewing, with the correlations twice as large for older children (+.40) than for younger children (+.19). Hawkins, et al. (1975) found that pre-adolescents who were heavy users of the mass media for political information in the 1972 campaign retained that knowledge at a later date. The children in their study displayed greater knowledge about Watergate the following spring, as compared to children with less news exposure. Overall, Atkin (1981) concludes that mass media do have an important impact on the political

cognitive processes of children.

In our focus group discussion, some of the children mentioned media usage in their comments about the campaign or the candidates. Matt, Dusty, and Vicky talked about watching the news as an activity they do with their parents. The nature of the effect of parents' news viewing on their children has had mixed results in previous studies. Atkin and Gantz (1974) found that exposure to programs preceding or following the news was a better predictor of news watching by children than were parents' news viewing patterns. However, our study found that none of the children knew which television programs preceded the network news.

In contrast to Atkin's study, parents' viewing choices appear to play a major role in exposing children to adult-format programming (St. Peters, et al., 1991). This counteracts the popular notion that children's exposure to adult programs results from lack of parental involvement. Indeed, children who view news programs in the home are most likely to do so because they are viewing concurrently with parents. There is no conclusive evidence to indicate that watching such programs at a young age will translate into independent adult usage, but it seems likely that parental modeling and a family atmosphere in which such viewing is standard will have a long-term influence on the child's media use. Egan (1978) also found a significant correlation between discussion of news at home and more frequent news watching by children.

Matt, Dusty, Alissa and Vicky's comments about watching the news with their parents appear to support these studies:

Matt: I watch the morning news. My stepdad gets up real early and does his exercises while he watches the news. I watched the news every day of the Gulf War. I like the debates. I watched every single one of them.

Dusty: In class, we always have current events in school. I also try to watch the news a lot. I read Time Magazine.

Q: Does your dad watch the news? Do the two of you watch it together?

Dusty: My Dad doesn't really watch the news all that much because he's at work. He's pretty busy, except in the morning, we turn on the TV and watch the news.

Q: Do you ever listen to news on the radio?

Dusty: Yes, I listen to the radio a lot. On Z104 [a top-40, "morning zoo" format FM station], they've got a lot of really cool news and say a lot of funny things.

Q: How do you learn about the different things the president does?

Vicky: My parents watch all this stuff, and I'm usually down there watching, so I just watch, too. Someday, I'll have to do it [vote], so I try to pay more attention.

In contrast to the others who watch television news with their parents, Alissa seemed to find it on her own, by "grazing."

Q: How do you find out information about the election?

Alissa: My mom tells me about it. They're always on Channel 6 [CNN] when I flip through the channels. Sometimes, I stop at that channel to see what they're talking about.

Vicky: On the news they usually do have -- when they give their speeches, not the debates -- when they are saying what they are going to do, and you can read it in the newspaper and stuff.

Most of the children watched only a small amount of the presidential debates. All the girls emphasized that their parents had used the debates to help them decide for whom to vote. Emily felt that the debates were crucial to the election process, because of their usefulness in evaluating the candidates.

Q: How do you decide who is the best person to vote for?

Emily: You listen to their speeches and everything, and I listened to the debates, and I thought that Clinton did a good job, but maybe Vicky thought Perot did a good job. My parents watched the debating and they thought that Clinton did a good job and Bob [her stepdad] said he thought that Clinton would do the best job because of his speech and everything.

Q: Did anyone else see the debates?

Courtney: I didn't see lots of parts. My dad watches it, but then he gets bored and flips the channel, so it's hard to see anything.

Lindsay: I only saw about 10 minutes of it. My parents watched most of it, but I got too bored and just went upstairs and turned on Nickelodeon.

Q: Did anyone's parents use the debates to help them decide?

Vicky: My parents used the debates to decide.

Andrea: My parents did, too.

Q: What would happen if there weren't any debates?

Emily: I think it would change a lot, because then you don't know what to judge them on. You don't know what Clinton would do, or you don't know what Ross Perot would do, and you don't know what Bush would change or anything. You wouldn't know what they would do if they were President. You would just vote.

While Lindsay said she was bored by the debates, Emily said she was especially interested when the candidates argued.

Q: What do you find interesting about the debates?

Emily: When they mudsling!

Q: What do you mean?

Emily: See, they'll fight back and forth and interrupt each other, and it gets real funny. Like Perot always made the other two laugh because of what he said, and I just thought it was kind of interesting.

Little research has been done in the area of children and political commercials. Atkin (1977) found that older elementary school children watched an average of

eight television candidate commercials during the 1976 election campaign, and half reported paying full attention to the commercial messages. All of the children in our focus group reported seeing commercials for not only the presidential candidates, but many of them also saw commercials for Senate and House races. Dusty had the most to say about the campaign commercials. He particularly did not like negative ads about Clinton, though he was confused about who produced them.

Q: Do you ever see commercials for candidates on TV? What do you think about them?

Dusty: Well, lately, what they've been doing is changing them all, so they're not saying for their candidate what's good about him, but now they're going out and finding out what's bad about him. Like close together], it says "Paid for by Bush-Quayle '92."

Q: Do you ever see any commercials that are any good?

Dusty: No. All those commercials are dumb.

Q: Do you think other people...

Dusty: Yes. [Anticipating the moderator's question.]

Q: Yes, what?

Dusty: I think that a lot of other people are influenced by those commercials.

Dusty's unwitting reference to the "third person effect" (Davison, 1983) demonstrated his confidence in his own cognitive abilities relative to that of the general populace.

Children spend several hours each day watching television programs, mainly for entertainment. Children do not watch entertainment programs in order to learn (Schramm, Lyle, and Parker, 1961), but "incidental learning" may occur. When watching various programs, children may pick up various pieces of information, acquiring it in this unintended way (Atkin, 1981). Researchers have found that such

learning occurs through processes such as "image cultivation" (Gerbner, et al., 1979) and "observational modeling" (Bandura, 1971). Atkin (1981) has concluded, "There may be significant political consequences from both general immersion in the fictional world portrayed in the entertainment media and specific exposure to certain role stereotypes or ideological themes" (317).

Although our study was not specifically looking at relationships between various attitudes and entertainment television viewing, we did find evidence of "incidental learning" in our discussion with the boys. Dusty persisted in repeating a "Saturday Night Live" skit lampooning Texas billionaire Ross Perot:

Dusty: Hi, my name's Ross Perot. Two thousand dollars says you're going to get down on the floor and squeal like a pig. Don't matter if I lose this bet, because I got another $3.5 billion at home.

Dusty repeated this as often as he could during our discussion, and other boys found it entertaining. Dusty also referred to Ross Perot as "Ross Pervert" and Iraq's Sadaam Hussein as "Sadaam Insane." Several of the boys enjoyed mimicking these nicknames. In addition to "Saturday Night Live," the boys mentioned "In Living Color," as a comedy program they watch.

It is difficult to determine whether Dusty's feelings toward Ross Perot were the result of seeing the candidate mocked on "Saturday Night Live" and other television programs, or whether viewing such programs merely reinforced his negative image of Perot. Some of the children expressed similar attitudes toward Perot, but none of them were as vocal as Dusty. In our short time with them, it was impossible to see what type of general effect Dusty had on the rest of the children in terms of affect or behavior, though their repetition of his phrases during our discussion may be evidence of a form of political socialization operating at the peer level.

None of the girls volunteered any comic routines about the presidential candidates. This may be due to the dynamics of each group. The boys were more rambunctious than the girls, and a few boys were eager to show off.

The Perot antics suggested that the children were very aware of his third party candidacy. We thought that some of the children might have parents who were Perot supporters, and the children, in turn, might support him. Perot was an object of ridicule for several of the boys, rather than a serious presidential contender. Some of the girls expressed concern about Perot's reliability and trustworthiness, as he had previously dropped out of the race. If elected, they were afraid he might drop out

again.

Q: What do you think of Perot?

Andrea: A lot of people are not voting for him because they're afraid that if they vote for him, he'll drop out, and then their vote will be for nothing.

Emily: They said on the radio that if Perot hadn't dropped out, he would've been higher than Clinton, and he would have most of the votes. But, since he dropped out, all his votes dropped, too. I don't think he's a quitter, but I don't know whether to trust him or not.

Alissa: It's sort of like when you tell a lie. After you tell a lie, then you try to tell the truth, nobody will believe you. Sort of like when he dropped out, then you don't know whether he'll do that again or not. So it's hard to trust him if he's going to do that or not.

Katie: A lot of kids in my class, the only reason they are voting for him is because he's a millionaire.

We had anticipated that the children would have seen some of MTV's "Rock the Vote" campaign, which might have affected their perceptions of the presidential election. Throughout the presidential election, MTV broadcast special news features about the candidates, covered both party conventions, and invited Clinton and Bush to appear before an audience of teenagers. The programs emphasized an awareness of the campaign. We found that the girls did watch MTV, but could not recall having seen anything about the election on MTV.

Q: Does anyone watch MTV?
[General response: affirmative nods; no one says they do not watch it.]

Q: Did you ever see any politics on MTV or anything about the campaign?
[General response: blank looks; "I don't remember."]

They had, however, seen news about the campaign on a cable channel marketed toward a younger audience, Nickelodeon.

Lindsay: On Nickelodeon, they had a "Kids Pick the President" thing. You could call in, and I called in and voted for Clinton.

Emily: On Nickelodeon, they also have "Nick News" that tells you interesting things, and, in one I watched, they told you the percentages of how people are voting. It said 38 percent are voting for Clinton, 31 percent for Bush, and 22 percent for Perot.

Emily's watching of "Nick News" is another example of "incidental learning." She may watch Nickelodeon for its kids-oriented programs, but learns about the campaign when "Nick News" comes on in between the programs.

Q: Is the news more interesting on these kids' shows?

Alissa: Well, they put it more like kids can understand it. Sometimes on the news, kids don't understand some of the words. Sometimes, I ask my mom what some of the words mean that they said. But, on Nick they put it in kids' words, so it's easier to understand.

Emily: On "Nick News" it just says little things -- it's not an actual show.

In addition, several of the children volunteered that they watched CNN.

Emily: CNN sometimes has stuff on about it [the presidential campaign].

Q: Do <u>you</u> watch CNN?

Emily: Sometimes it's the only thing on that's good.

Most of these children were aware of "Nick News" election segments. Alissa's and Emily's remarks that the "kids" news is easier to understand suggest a sense of frustration with "adult" newscasts. Emily recognized that the news on Nickelodeon is only brief segments, not a standard news program.

Previous research has examined politically relevant effects of entertainment

exposure, such as affect toward police, lawyers, and the government (Dominick, 1973). However, our results suggest that further research is needed in the area of entertainment programming during an election year. Of particular interest is the relationship between entertainment exposure and affect toward candidates.

Interpersonal Communication

Most early political socialization research focused on the family as the primary agent of developing a child's party identification, political knowledge, participation, and efficacy (see Hyman, 1959; Greenstein, 1965; Davies, 1965; Dawson and Prewitt, 1969; Sigel, 1970). More recent research has shown, however, that the parental influence has been overrated (Hess and Torney, 1967; Jennings and Niemi, 1968, 1974; Connell, 1972; Sears, 1975; Niemi and Sobieszek, 1977).

In a review of the literature, Sears (1975) concluded that agreement between parents and children was greatest for "highly visible events" (such as presidential candidates and wars), followed by political party identification, and the least agreement existed for policy issues and general political attitudes. One reason for this is that few children actually discuss the news with their parents. Drew and Reeves (1980) found that only 10 percent of their sample regularly discuss television news with parents, friends, or in the classroom. Jackson-Beeck (1979) was surprised that interpersonal communication was a much weaker predictor of political knowledge and interest than newspaper and television exposure.

Children's political attitudes may be related to parents' socio-economic status. Sigel (1970) found that shared social status accounts for much of the political agreement between parent and children. Another reason may be the actual content of family communication.

Our study found some evidence of parental influence in the children's political socialization. While some of the children indicated they talked about news with their parents, most of their discussions centered around their parents' vote choice. It was interesting that some children only spoke about politics with one parent, boys with their fathers, and girls with their mothers. Dusty only spoke with his dad, a "real smart guy."

Q: Do you ever talk about politics at home?

Dusty: I talk a lot about political stuff with my dad, because I'm pretty interested in that, and my dad's a really smart guy, and he knows

everything.

Q: So, the two of you talk about it?

Dusty: And, I talk about like who he's going to vote for and stuff like that.

Q: But, you don't talk about it with your Mom?

Dusty: No.

Q: How do you learn about the different things the president does?

Andrea: Sometimes, I overhear my parents talking about it.

Q: How do you find out different things about the election?

Alissa: My mom tells me a lot about it.

Q: Who talks about politics with their parents?

Vicky: I'm curious. So I ask them who they're going to vote for.

This indicates different levels of discussion quality. While Andrea only overhears her parents talking, Vicky is more of an "information-seeker."

Conclusions

In our investigation of children's attitudes, information sources, and interest toward the presidential election, several general themes emerged. Overall, the children's knowledge of abstract concepts like democracy was not articulated as clearly as concrete information and feelings toward the electoral process.

President Bush was not the object of children's idealization. Our findings demonstrate that the president is not a benevolent leader in the children's eyes; rather, he is a failure. The children's images of Bush, as well as their ratings of his job performance, were overwhelmingly negative. He has not fulfilled promises, so he cannot be trusted. Regarding his record, the children specifically mentioned his failures in protecting the environment, raising taxes, and

neglecting Americans while helping foreigners.

The boys' comments about Bush indicated not only their disapproval, but their disrespect, for the president. Some of the boys' uninhibited exclamations ("Bush sucks!") illustrated their frank, emotion-laden evaluations of the president. In addition, the boys' on-going mimics of "Saturday Night Live" routines enhanced the negativity directed at certain political figures. We wondered about the effects of televised lampooning of candidates and other political figures on children. Do shows like "Saturday Night Live" validate mockery of authority? Do such programs contribute to children's healthy skepticism of authority, or do they detract from more in-depth discussion and understanding of the political process? Or, do such programs merely transmit humorous material to class clowns, having little effect on most children?

As our evidence details, the children's minds were full of information with which to support their unfavorable evaluations of Bush. They adeptly outlined their rationales negating Bush; however, their support for the challengers was not bolstered with factual content. Clinton seemed like he would be a better president, and he was a likable alternative to Bush for the children. Yet, the children did not articulate his issue stands. Clearly, they knew key aspects of Bush's record in office, and they used that knowledge to judge him. As Emily said, there was more on which to judge the incumbent, compared to the challengers -- Bush has demonstrated his capabilities; he's made some "wrong choices"; and the other candidates have better chances of winning.

Our discussions with the children indicate that the campaign period results in a high level of excitement. The children were eager to talk about the debates, campaign commercials, issues, and the candidates themselves. Many seemed to mimic popular criticisms of President Bush, particularly the poor condition of the national economy ("Read my lips. No new taxes."). They did not display an understanding of Bush's record over time. There was some mention of the Gulf War as an aspect of his presidency, but most of the comments referred to more recent events. We wonder how these same children would have evaluated the president earlier in his term. Were they expressing opinions that were relatively stable over time, or parroting Campaign '92's "bandwagon" sentiment?

Despite the children's negative evaluations of President Bush, their faith in the system is solid. All the children expressed high levels of political efficacy in terms of voting. "Every vote counts" was a resounding theme among the children's discussion of the importance of voting. In other words, the leader may

have failed, but the system still works -- people can choose a new president. Early research (Easton and Hess) suggested an integral link between children's images of the president and belief in the norms and institutions of the system. Conversely, our research shows that children's negative feelings about the president do not taint belief in democratic practices.

In our discussions with the children, it became clear that many of them judged Bush based on their internalized conceptions about the official role of the president and his specific duties. In other words, we detected normative and practical standards for evaluating Bush: the jobs he should handle and his actual accomplishments in office. Several children used the phrase, "Bush doesn't seem *fit* for president," demonstrating to us that Bush did not fulfill their expectations. Moreover, our findings seem to corroborate Dennis and Webster's suggestion that children's presidential images reflect current national issues and changing political climates. Many children mentioned the importance of the environment, an issue the children believed Bush did not properly address.

Children, like adults, display varying levels of political information. Some of the children we spoke with, such as Emily and Dusty, are already political junkies. These kids are avid consumers of political information and are ready to engage in issue-based evaluations of political actors. Emily had the most informed opinion on Bush's handling of environmental issues. Dusty was quick to criticize Bush's foreign aid spending, while domestic problems (he mentioned the nation's schools as an example) were not addressed. Future research might track such politically energized youth to see if their interest continues as they mature.

Which is more important, the family or the media? A highly debatable question. Our focus group results point to the primacy of the broadcast media as the major source of political information. None of the children volunteered newspapers as a source of information. "Saturday Night Live," Nickelodeon, the presidential debates, and other television programs stimulated the children, and left them full of comments and questions. Political information stemming from a television format seemed to have a great impact on the children. This is not to say that the family's role is unimportant. Our findings suggest that children who watch such political programming (news and debates) with parents display greater understanding of the issues. Interaction with parents enhances political learning.

Finally, we came away from our discussion with the impression that several of the children had a sophisticated political understanding. These children were

able to connect levels of the political process, rather than just relating a campaign news item or candidate critique. For instance, Dusty referred to the "third-person effect," linking persuasive media advertisements to gullible citizens. Vicky indicated the conflicts inherent in the process of simultaneously running a campaign and a country: "Being president's a hard job, and you go through a lot of stress, even going through the election, you have to go through all those debates and everything."

We suggest several areas for future research. Greater attention should be paid to elementary school children and their political ideas and attitudes during an election campaign. Most political socialization research of campaign periods has focused on older children and adolescents nearing voting age. Future research need not be limited to cross-section analysis; long-term panel analysis, beginning at this early age, is warranted, to examine how early political excitement and efficacy dissipate. Additional research should focus on the role of kids-oriented news programs and their long-term effects. The children in our focus groups seemed energized by such programming. Do these programs stimulate continued political interest over time?

The nature of focus group research prohibits generalizability of findings. Besides problems that arise from particular group dynamics, there also may be participant anxiety or discretion (modifying or withholding comments) in vocalizing opinions in front of peers or researchers. Conversely, others wish to impress the moderator(s), and thus attempt to dominate the discussion and show off. Other participants may alter their responses due to the presence of a recording device.

It should also be noted that we did not interview the children's parents or teachers. Thus, we cannot reliably assess the specific contributions of family and school to their political attitudes and knowledge. For instance, many children said they inquired about their parents' vote choice. Without parental verification, however, we cannot know whether children actively engaged their parents or vice versa. Finally, the children in our focus group were demographically similar. All were white, suburban children, with two working parents (see Appendix A).

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APPENDIX A
Participant Demographic Information

Child Name	Age	Grade in School	Parents' Occupations Mother	Father
Girls				
Courtney	9	4th	secretary, TV-27	Lanter Courier
Katie	10	4th	WPS Health Insurance	state employee
Lindsay	9	4th	counselor, New Start	computer programmer, UW
Andrea	10	4th	bio-tech lab	7th grade English teacher
Emily	10	5th	medical records, Physicians Plus	electrician
Vicky	10	5th	dairy science, UW	professor, UW
Alissa	11	5th	M&I Bank	Famous Footwear
Boys				
Dusty	10	4th	computer engineer, Nicolet Instrument	economic advisor, Wis. Power & Light
Ben	9	4th	high school teacher	automotive repair
Trenton	10	4th	elem. school teacher	CUNA Mutual
Brian	9	4th	dietician, St. Mary's	DNR
Jacob	9	4th	computer technician, State Science Lab	meterorologist/prof., State Science Lab
Matt	9	4th	minister, First Presbyterian	MCI

APPENDIX B
Focus Group Interview Schedule

Good afternoon. My name is Ed, and this is Carolyn and Katie. Today, we want to talk about our country and the election. We hope you can help us . We need some information and your opinions. Your opinions are very important to our work. There are no right or wrong answers here. We just want to know what you think about a few things. After we're all done, we have a treat for you!

Image of the President

Who runs our country? Who's the **leader**?

Can you tell me **who** the President of our country is?

What do you think about him?

What does the **President do**? [What's his job?]

How do you know if the President is **good or not**? What makes a person a good President?

Would **you** ever want to be President? Why/not?

What would you do **if you were President**?

Government/Politics

Can anyone tell me what **kind of government** we have in the United States?

What does living in a **democracy** mean?

Voting

The **election day** is coming up soon, right? Do you know when it is?

What is **voting**? Tell me what you think voting is all about.

Does it make a **difference** if people vote? Why/not?

Do you think you'll want to **vote** some day? Why/not?

If you were voting in this election, who would **you vote for**?

Can anyone tell me about the **political parties**? What are the two big parties? What do the parties stand for?

1992 Election Campaign

Do you **remember** any other elections before this one? Which one?

Do you remember who was president before George Bush?

What do you think about the **election**?

Do you think the Presidential election is important? Why/not?

Do you think the Presidential election is interesting? Why/not?

Can you tell me what a **candidate** does? What is a candidate?

Do you think there are any good candidates running for President? What's good about them?

One of them dropped out for a while and then came back.. What do you think of that? Is that quitting?

Why do we have elections is the US?

Who's this? [Hold up photos.]
What do you think about him?
What does he stand for? What's he like?
Do you know which party he belongs to?
[for **Clinton**] Did anyone go to his rally/speech at the Capitol a few weeks ago? What did you think about it?
[for **Bush**] Did anyone go to his speech in Milwaukee?
[for **Perot**] Has anyone seen his TV programs?
Who's your **favorite**? Why?
Who do you think will **win** the election? Why?

Media

Have you **heard** anything about the Presidential election? What have you heard it? Where?

Have you **seen** anything about the Presidential election? What have you seen it? Where?

Is it **important** to find out information about the election? Why/not?

When you **want to find out** something about the election, what do you do? Who do you talk to? Where do you get your information?

Do you ever see the **candidates on TV**? Do you watch at home?

Do you **watch TV with your family**? Do they like to see the candidates on TV? Do you like one better than the other?

Do you ever see **commercials** for the candidates on TV? What do you think of

the commercials? Do you like one candidate's commercials more than another's? Why?

What parts of the campaign commercials can you remember? Can you describe one?

[*Do you watch cable? MTV? Do you listen to the radio? Do you watch TV? Local vs. national news? Do your parents watch the news? Do you get a newspaper at home? What are your favorite parts? Why?*]

What do you think about the **news media**?

Would you like to be a reporter?

What do you think it would be like to be a reporter?

Name a reporter that you think is good. Why is he/she good?

Communication

Do you know who your **mom and/or dad is voting** for?

How do you know? Do they **talk** about it?

Are both your parents voting for the **same** person? How do you know?

Do you support who your parent(s) is/are voting for?

Do you ever **talk about the election**?

Who do you talk about the President/candidates with --- parents, peers, at school?